The sun broke over the hills that separated Balmaria's sovereignty from the northwest frontier the natives called *Aljiri*. The air was sweet with clouds of spring pollen that had not yet seasoned the Aljiri, and carried with it the chill of the misty dew that rolled off the mountains as the day approached. The terrain was littered with shaved gravel and spotted with pebbles. The soil here held little moisture and the plants that grew were malnourished and sickly. Only the weeds seemed healthy enough for the eminent dry summer, their jaundiced stalks lancing through the hardpan. It was easy to see why the people who chose to live here kept constantly on the move. Crops would not grow, and even if they did the little nutrients that the pitiful soil yielded would not remain for the next sowing. The hillsman did husband and barter livestock, but there was little enough to eat for the hillsman, let alone their grazing sheep and goats. The regions they had once inhabited were barren—bushes picked clean of their berries and the stale smell of manure lingering behind like flatulent ghosts.

These nomads were very distrustful when it came to the two juggernaut nations that sandwiched their southern borders. Balmaria was ambitious and ever expanding, but the Masonian military actually had the gall, the *audacity*, to trespass into their lands and practice troop movements on the plains. Troop movements being defined as pillaging villages and stealing their resources, an act of war that the hillsman could not ignore but also couldn't afford to confront. It was one of many dilemmas they faced. The hillsman knew that if they did attack the desert armies they would face extinction at the command of Hirithirat, mad despot of Masonia. However, if they continued to submit and kept forfeiting their dwindling resources, their people would most certainly succumb to starvation. They had an abundant source of water (maybe contaminated with micro-invaders, but nothing a good boil couldn't kill) from the springs that ran off the melting snowcaps as the warmer season arrived, but you couldn't *eat* water. Water wouldn't fill the distended bellies of starving children with toothpick arms and legs, nor would it give the strength needed for the warriors to defend their homeland.

One quiet morning ... and in Aljiri it was almost *always* quiet—a lone traveler walked a series
e surrounding landscape by no more than a slightly
and winded clumsily up the hillsides, occasionally
chbacks leading up and down impossibly steep
asant, blew down from the mountains and stirred up
d visibility and dust devils chased each other through
st, had been trained and was well prepared for the
n. He wore a brown sackcloth cloak that was ripped
owed against the stinging curtains of dirt; his face
of burning hazel eyes staring out. On his back he
atly tucked next to it. At his side a salarium dagger
ra rose from the blade like mist off a river at dawn,
barely perceptible to the human eye. His canteen was empty and he had not eaten in almost three days, but he had the flint for a fire and more importantly, the will to survive.

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To the eyes of another the traveler looked like a hunter who had strayed too far from his turf and now wandered aimlessly through some unfamiliar, sinister land. And there were eyes watching him, there were *always* eyes watching him. The hillsman had an unhealthy (if not unnatural) curiosity attributed to life in this horridly dull land, but it was land they knew very well and they knew how to stay hidden. If the traveler was but a simple hunter lost in the wilderness he would never have seen them, but this traveler noticed and had been watching them for two days. He didn't

believe they realized he'd detected their presence, and so he kept up the charade and continued to pretend he was lost, walking in circles and throwing up his arms in disgust when he came to the same rock for the third time. In truth he *was* lost (at least a little bit, he still had a general sense of direction), but he knew when these men gathered enough courage or he came too close to somewhere he wasn't supposed to be they would come to him and bring him where he wanted to go. Either that or they would shoot an arrow through his throat. And although he could easily slay them if they attacked, he would surrender peacefully. He had business with these nomads, and didn't want to think of what sort of greeting it would be if he butchered some of them.

The traveler had seen enough wild game since he entered Aljiri that could've kept him well fed, but he wasn't sure how the hillsman would take to him hunting their game, and so kept his focus on the local botany. He'd figured he would find wild scallions and yams, but was dismayed at just how barren Aljiri really was. There was plenty of fauna around, but most of it was poisonous weeds and others that he could not identify and dared not eat. His brother once mistook the wrong mushrooms, and though the incident ended with them all laughing, it could've been much worse. In this hellhole he couldn't afford such a careless mistake.

All day he had ascended a range of rounded hills that had continued to grow in size. At the last hill the land abruptly dropped in a sharp slope to a valley—an empty bowl that stretched from the foothills of the Jaggar Mountains where he now stood, to the sea far to the north. He could see rivers edged with green snaking through the steppe, and a strange black cloud hovered low in the west like a puff of foul smoke.

He drank and filled his canteen at a clear stream that sprung between the shoulders of two abutting hills, and then followed its course down, clinging for purchase to the plants that grew on its rocky banks. By the time he reached the bottom of the valley the sun was beginning to set, and his hands were scratched and torn from thistles. The stream continued softly through moss-covered stones, fading into the velvety darkness of the maturing dusk. The traveler considered there would be fish in the brook, but he still didn't want to chance aggravating his nomad observers. He splashed water on his face and the nape of his neck. Dandelions and wild cabbage grew along the banks. He didn't, however, hear the distinct croaks of bullfrogs and saw no lily pads in the water. It was a disappointment—he could use the protein. There were other sources he could and would resort to, but it wouldn't be as tasty as a big fat bullfrog. *Dirt dwellers it is, unless…* He rolled his cloak up over his shoulder and reached into the water. He flipped a few flat stones and sighed in relief when he saw the creepy river crabs skittering about, waving their little pinchers at him. He collected half a dozen and placed them into his hemp sack.

He set up camp on the east shore of the river, about half a league from the hills. He ate the river crabs raw, but they didn't provide much meat and left him still hungry. He gathered as much dry kindle around the banks as he could find and sparked a fire, heating a pot of water over the flames. He threw in two handfuls of dandelion shoots into the water, and then reclined on a hassock of grass and chewed on some wild cabbage while he waited. When they were cooked, the shoots were soft as noodles and had a sweet flavor.

After his meal he laid down in the hassock and thought of home. Not long after that he was asleep, for the first time in three days.

"What do we do?" Palidor whispered. He was young, and some might have considered him handsome if bathing had been a common practice with the nomads. His face was caked with grime and his oily brown hair stuck out helter-skelter. He wore a shredded leather loincloth and a robe that may have once been white.

"I don't know, the poor bastard seems lost," Punabi replied. He scratched his grizzled jaw and gave a toothless grimace. The witchdoctor said he had the bone disease, and it was painful. A year ago the pain was like the moon, sometimes full, sometimes just a sliver, and sometimes not there

at all. Now the fucker ached constant.

"We should just kill him."

"That doesn't seem right. What if he's a priest? I don't want to answer to the gods for this one, child."

"Punabi…"

Punabi sighed. "Let's take him back to camp and bring him before the chieftains. I don't want his blood on my hands. Alinari already has enough blood on his. I don't see what difference one more life will make. "

"If you say so." Palidor hated when people spoke ill of his father, but what he hated more was that they were usually right in their assumptions.

"I do," Punabi said, shifting his eyes back to the sleeping traveler.

Even in his sleep he could hear them coming, and with one eye slit open he watched them creeping through the razor grass. His small fire had burned to embers. The traveler's right hand was tucked in his cloak, caressing the salarium dagger with the thoughtfulness of a considerate lover. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to use it.

There were five of them, and probably runners up in the hills, ready to sprint back to their camp and report if anything unexpected happened. Even if their noise hadn't woken him, their stench would have. *Should've stayed upwind*, he thought. As they got closer, the five broke apart and encircled him. Satisfied with their formation, they closed around him like a noose.

"Hail interloper!" The one with graying hair roared. He had a spear white-knuckled in his hands.

The traveler, feigning sleep, bolted up into a sitting position. "Wha-?"

"You are somewhere you shouldn't be. We do not allow guests to roam our land without invitation. The penalty for trespass is death." The older man's tone softened a little. "What is your business here?"

"My business is that I'm lost. I did not mean to trespass, and I am no interloper. If you point me in the right direction, I will gladly leave your land and never return."

"I'm afraid I cannot let you do that. I have my orders." The man with the graying hair rubbed his jaw as he spoke, as if it ached him there.

"I mean no ill will, and if I have offended you I apologize." The traveler began to get up.

"Apologies are not for me to accept, stranger, nor clemency to grant. You must answer to our chieftain. Will you come with us without resistance?"

The nomads standing around him brandished their weapons.

The traveler put his hands up into the air. "I yield good sir, of course I will come with you if there is no other way. I meant no transgression." And he really didn't, but there was no way to convince these people of that.

He would have to prove it to them.

The traveler went with the band of nomads. There were three more waiting for them in the hills, as he had suspected, and they joined the rest when it became obvious the traveler was not going to put up a fight. Apparently they didn't consider him too much of a threat, because they made no effort to bind him. Perhaps it was because there was nowhere to run to, and in the steppe there was certainly nowhere to hide. They did, however, confiscate his bow and quiver. They did not find the salarium dagger, tucked deep in his waistband.

The night passed, and then morning broke. As the sun began to reach its apex on the next day, and the land baked with spring heat, the traveler spotted a dead bird in the scrub. The traveler was from the coast, and he recognized the bird immediately. Its white plumage and narrow beak identified it as a mallary, a common seabird. He saw another dead mallary…and then another. *What the hell are these birds doing so far inland?* he thought.

"Filthy pests," he heard Palidor mutter to himself.

The traveler bent down to examine one of the birds. A hand clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him back. It was Punabi.

"Don't get too close, they carry the cholera."

"Has that been a problem here?" he asked casually.

Punabi didn't answer, but the grim look on his face told him it was. The traveler wanted to ask how these birds got here, but the nomads most likely didn't know and he didn't want to annoy them any further with his questioning.

They headed west, and as they continued the flattening landscape became more and more littered with mallary carcasses and even a few egrets. The air reeked with the stench of decay, and flies buzzed in thick clusters. Oddly, no birds could be seen in the slate sky above. *Could they have all died off?* It was possible. These were seabirds and the steppe couldn't offer them any of the foods they were used to.

The traveler stepped on a mallary carcass, the hollow bones crunching under his sole. Did the cholera outbreak originate with the birds, plucking undigested berries from disease-ridden manure? Or was it something they could've carried with him? The traveler was going to bet on the former rather than latter. The mallaries were too far inland, and probably would've died long before they had ever reached the Aljiri.

The hillsman suddenly stopped, eyes round with fear. The traveler stopped as well, looking around for the cause of their alarm, but didn't see anything. Faintly he heard the calls and chirps of birds far away, carried on the western wind. It sounded like a large flock—hundreds, possibly thousands of birds—a choir of tiny voices. And then:

"SSSQQUUAAAWWWKKKKKKK!"

The shriek sliced like a knife across the plain, produced by one very, very large bird. It was not the friendly song of mallaries, or even the knell of crows. It echoed across the hills to the south, bouncing back and forth until finally dwindling to a whisper. It probably only lasted a minute, but it seemed to stretch for hours. The nomads all dropped to the ground and tried to hide themselves in the scrub, cringing and holding their hands over their ears.

"Get down stranger! Get down if you value your life!" Palidor shouted to him. The traveler joined them in the brush, all eyes scanning the sky.

"What is it?" he asked.

"*Kuutranarba*," Punabi grunted.

"What is that?"

"Devil bird stranger, it means devil bird."

In the steppe beyond was *Kuutranarba*, or Hark, as countless sailors had called him for countless centuries. The albatross' body was as large as a bull's, and had a wingspan of forty feet. Once a regal creature, he had been considered a demigod of the ocean until his apotheosis luck had run dry and he chose the wrong feeding grounds.

A quarter of a century earlier, strange anomalies happened in the skies. The silver moon turned gold, and flaming metal giants poured forth from the firmament. One such metal giant fell into a section of the sea that was shallow from constant volcanic activity. The water had teemed with aquatic life, many coral reefs zigzagging below the surface and atolls forming natural lagoons. When the burning metal impacted, the sea boiled and shrank away from its smoldering ore, causing a rogue wave that smashed against the island cliffs. The reef was cloven in two, and the water came rushing back, filling in the crater and the metal giant buried within its bowl, dead fish crowding the surface. But some creatures survived, and in time the reef began to heal itself, weaving and stitching across the uneven surface of the metal. Schools of fish slowly returned. And the reef was once again rich with the shellfish that Hark enjoyed, and he often came to feed there, not the least bit curious about the new object that was wedged amongst the coral and rocks. The revered Anja Cecilbourne (rest her soul) could have told anyone to stay the hell away from it; it obviously had a reactor leak and was spreading radiation. Hark, of course, had no comprehension of such things, and with time the radiation took its toll on him, his body riddled with cancerous tumors, metastasizing and traveling

through the bloodstream, poisoning his ancient brain. A simple creature would have died, painfully but not necessarily quickly. But the ancient sea god was stronger than that. Instead, he became the mutated abomination the hillsman knew as *Kuutranarba,* the devil bird. Disoriented and insane, *Kuutranarba* eventually left his feeding grounds, beginning his flight west towards Aljiri, his tainted influence carrying his army of sea raptors with him.

Now *Kuutranarba* sat upon a lonely tree in the steppe, the bole arching and groaning under his massive weight, looking like it might snap at any moment. His hunger was undying, since the tumors that had developed in his stomach prevented him from properly digesting food and—as a result—bloody and pussy diarrhea constantly flowed out of his rectum, coating his once majestic tail feathers. Most of the blood was not his own.

Above his head thousands of birds flew in circles. *Mallaries.* From a distance it looked like a swirling cloud, an evil halo that rained white shit, painting the ground a chalky shade. It was easy now to see how the cholera spread so quickly.

Even from a distance—about a league away—the traveler and his 'escorts' could clearly make out the shape of the gargantuan monster that dwarfed the ancient tree it perched on. They bared witness to the eddying dark cloud producing the literal shit-storm that showered the land with pestilence. Before the devil bird's eyes had begun to fail he would have easily spotted the nomads hunkered down in the thin brush. But now cataracts obscured his vision to a milky haze.

"Seems like you have quite the problem there," the traveler murmured.

No one answered him. They all stared uneasily at the massive sea monster perverting their homeland. They were frightened—no, it was more than that—they were *terrified*. Accustomed to a life of hardship and the perpetual threat of starvation, in all their years they had never encountered such calamity before. The little food they managed to scrounge was now potentially contaminated, and their loved ones died daily in grave numbers. Some starved because they refused to eat, and others who *did* eat invited the risk of contracting cholera. They were damned if they did and damned if they didn't.

"When he moves, we move," Punabi stated, sounding unbelievably calm. The other hillsman reluctantly agreed.

They waited, sprawled on their bellies, yellow leaves dangling above their heads and thorns scratching their arms. The day grew long, the air stagnate under the foliage. Shadows pooled as the sun began its descent. Sweat poured down their faces and stuck their cloaks to the skin.

"SQUAAAAWWWKKK!!!" Kuutranarba bellowed and then pumped his wings and finally took to the skies, heading east. His mallary air force followed.

"All right, stranger. We move, be quick. Steadfast," Palidor said. A faint smile broke across the traveler's face. *How fast?* He wanted to ask.

"Is it safe?" The traveler asked instead.

"As safe as it can be. We must seek shelter and we must move quickly. I cannot predict where that beast is going, but I can tell you he *will* be back," Punabi said. He had already started sprinting, heading northwest across the steppe.

They traveled for several hours without break. The traveler could tell the men were exhausted. He, however, was only slightly winded and knew that was caused from lack of sleep. On a good day he could've ran halfway back to Balmaria without breaking a sweat. But he was trained to do that sort of thing. The nomads were not, but despite their weakened condition, they kept moving, picking up speed every time they heard *Kuutranarba's* distant cries echo across the plains, the strange acoustics making it impossible to pinpoint a location or even general direction of the source.

As the sun began to disappear, setting the western horizon to burn, the traveler and nomads came upon a set of hills in the middle of the prairie. The range was horseshoe-shaped and crowned in

heather. They crested the middle hill, fatter and taller than the rest, and the traveler sucked in his breath at the sight of the dusty village below. It sat nestled between the two curving arms of the range, hundreds of tents constructed of leather hide and bone. On the north end of the village was a massive bonfire, flames licking thirty feet high. There was the unmistakable smell of burning human flesh and hair in the air. The traveler had smelled it before. Masonian's army often held mass funeral pyres for the dead they removed from a battlefield. The stench didn't seem to phase the hillsman; the poor bastards had become acclimated to it. It had become everyday.

They strolled down the hill and into the village. The scent of garlic, jasmine and rosemary assaulted the traveler and drowned out the smell of the dead. He found himself craving a clove-roasted ham, and when his mind finally made the association, his stomach turned and his gorge rose. He managed not to throw up, his eyes watering, and he spat into the dirt ropey strands of saliva.

"Life hasn't been rosy here stranger," Palidor said angrily. "*Kuutranarba* has seen to that."

"This is awful. Have so many died?" the traveler asked, still holding in the urge to vomit.

Their silence was all the answer he needed.

They moved swiftly through the village, passing the empty shells of women and children who sat outside their yurts, contemplating the early signs of sickness, or the sickness of a loved one…or ones. The cholera had affected everyone and the people of Aljiri offered their prayers to countless gods, some of which they could name and some of which they could not. But the only god who had answered their prayers was the mad demigod *Kuutranarba*, formerly Hark, and he had not responded in the way the nomads had intended.

The traveler had suspected the village was far too large for one clan when he'd first crossed over the hills. As he made his way through the village, his suspicion was confirmed. The village was setup in a sort of circle, each clan making up a pie wedge, and paths branching off the center like spokes. There was a cornucopia of tents and grass huts and yurts, and the traveler even glimpsed some mud and straw adobes. Each different pie wedge was clearly demarcated by a dirt spoke. There was a mix of culture here (and tension); one the traveler began to understand. The clans of Aljiri had loosely unified in hopes that greater numbers would offer greater protection. He wasn't sure it was working. From the look of things, the traveler could only assume things had gotten much worse. Even the living looked like the walking dead, as their lack of nourishment pushed their ribs from their chest. These people were surrounded by death, they lived with death, they breathed the sickly stench of death, and there were few brave enough to chance eating their death. They had watched their families perish one by one. Some lucky ones died quickly, but all of them were guaranteed a painful death. The peoples of Aljiri also *heard* death from the swan songs of the dying and the anguish of the bereaved.

The traveler's escorts took him down the central artery of paths and led him to the one permanent structure in the entire shantytown, located in the center of the wheel. It was half-assed carpentry at its finest, poorly constructed out of scrounged timber. But there were no gaps, no breaks, and no holes to view or eavesdrop from. So the traveler assumed that despite their lack of woodworking skills, the hillsmans' wooden house served its purpose precisely as it was meant to. He had no doubt the tribe lords resided within the walls and addressed their aims in solitude. No need for outsiders to overhear just how desperate their leaders were, as it would only lead to an even greater panic. The traveler knew that to be true, experienced with a costly war back home. It was that very desperation that had brought him here in the first place.

'Allies' didn't always remain allies, especially in times of war. Many of Balmaria's allies shared a coalition due to either economic or military benefit. Running an empire was a dirty business and it sometimes called for stepping on some toes. The trick was all in whose toes you were stepping on. Balmaria respected honor and reached out to valiant nations with sincere tokens of friendship. These bonds lasted the longest, but submission was necessary to control the minds of fools and cowards. Cowards would weasel their way around anything and turn their backs when they were most needed, partly out of spite, but generally due to their entrenched nature. This was becoming all the more common as these 'allies' saw Balmaria become more and more weakened from escalating war.

These nations envied Balmaria's might and loathed them for it. Now they closed their ports to them and some even had the audacity to openly trade with Balmaria's mortal enemy. Their time would come, the traveler was most certain of that. For the time being, however, they needed allies; real genuine allies they could rely upon and they *must* take them anywhere they could find them. The traveler wasn't here on behalf of the king—in fact the king had no knowledge of his mission. Prince Hulie knew of it, and the prince had argued that the traveler's decision would have been considered treasonous if he were anyone other than who he was. But Hulie did not go any further than trying to dissuade him, and did not prevent his leaving. The traveler, feeling this was of the up most importance, had departed from the capital immediately.

"What is it meaning of this *intrusion* Punabi?" Alinari said dryly. "Can you not see we are presently…occupied?"

"Forgive me, sirrah," Punabi replied, his tone even drier. "We have encountered a trespasser upon our lands. We-I felt obligated to apprehend him."

"…And?" Alinari said impatiently. There was bad blood here. The four other tribe lords felt the tension so thick they could've cut it with their thumb. They shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"*And* I felt it was your obligation to deal with *him*, even though you often remind us how little obligations you feel you have."

"Punabi you cretin, you step dangerously over your boundaries," Alinari spat.

"*I* am a tired old man surrounded by death old *friend*, one who works tirelessly to provide a useless fool such as yourself food from the green lands while our people suffer off the disease ridden foods of the contaminated fields. I am very aware of my boundaries…and *yours*." Punabi's eyes were blazing. "Is nothing good enough for the likes of you?"

Irna, mistress of the north clan, stepped forward (**I would suggest a brief description of Irna here**).

"Please Punabi, sit down," she said calmly. "We understand your frustration, we do. But screaming and name calling amongst one another will solve none of our problems."

"She's right," Sedthorn of the river clan said. "Your travels must've exhausted you. Please, sit down."

Punabi accepted the offered seat, his eyes briefly glaring at Alinari and then back to the other tribe lords.

"Tell us of this man," Irna said.

"Not much to say, really." Punabi reclined in the chair with an appreciative pop of sore joints. "The steppe is no place for an interrogation, as you well know. Not with that *thing* flying about." He paused, "He seems to have headed here from the southeast."

"From Balmaria?" Sedthorn asked curiously.

"Possibly, he was lightly armed. I think perhaps he was a hunter who wandered too far from his lands. I'm afraid I don't know much more than that."

"A hunter…or a spy," Alinari said.

"Oh sure, and what a sly one he is," Punabi sneered. "Wandering so freely and aimlessly out in the open."

"Very well, bring him here and we shall deal with him," Irna said.

The traveler entered the rickety hut and wasn't the least bit surprised to see that inside was just as—if not more—rickety. The smell of musk and mold lingered like smoke damage. It reminded him of his days as an acolyte at the temple. In the center of the shack was a large table constructed of mud-bricks, and on its surface were a wide variety of foods: venison and coneys and mountain herbs and vegetables.

Even in this hovel the nobles eat well, the traveler thought. *I guess some things are universal*.

On the north side of the shack five tribe lords sat in a half circle around the food-laden table. The fat one called Alinari regarded him with distrustful eyes.

"Who are you and why do you trespass on our lands?" the fat one thundered.

"Alinari-" the middle-aged woman started to say.

"This is rightfully my land Irna, I'll deal with him as I see fit. Again, who are you and why do you pervert our land with your lowly presence?"

What an asshole, the traveler marveled. *There's one in every crowd.*

"Speak spy!"

"My name is Chasereth Lionheart, adopted prince of Balmaria."

"Horseshit!" snapped Alinari. "How dare you speak so defiantly in our presence?"

Chase pulled the sleeve of his right arm up and revealed the sacred marking on the inside of his wrist. It was the mark of Ji'Kodia. An intricate circular design, part tattooed and part seared into his flesh with hot branding needles, so complex it was near impossible to forge. The symbol was a work of art few had the ability to create. The shack went silent. The tribe lords were awestruck.

"As I said, my name is Chasereth Lionheart. I am the adopted son of Anastasi and proud warrior of the temple," Chase repeated.

"No prince would wander these lands without an escort," the fat one said stubbornly.

"I have many enemies, this is true. That is precisely why I have come without one. I have chosen to keep a low profile for both our sakes."

"That is very hard to believe…*prince,*" Alinari sneered.

"Nevertheless, I speak true." Chase continued, "It is my understanding that the desert people have been causing trouble here."

"Trouble is an inferior word for what the Masonians have done here, Chasereth Lionheart," the woman said.

"They rape our women and steal our food, but that is the least of our concerns," Alinari said.

"Indeed," Sedthorn added.

"I have noticed and I have nothing but the deepest sorrow for your people." Chase replied. "But, I had no knowledge of this before I came here."

"So what is it that you want Prince of Balmaria?" Sedthorn said. He was an elderly man.

"Right to the point, I like that." Chase smiled, "I have come with terms that would be mutually beneficial."

"I highly doubt that." Alinari muttered. A redheaded tribelord on the far right nodded in agreement.

"We will not fight for you if that is what you are asking." Irna said solemnly.

"It isn't." Chase said his smile did not fade. "To war with a nation like Masonia with so few numbers, let alone your current condition would be outright suicide." To that all the tribelords nodded in agreement.

"I merely wish to ask you to keep an eye on the northern passages through the mountains and nothing more."

"So you would draw us into *your* selfish war." Alinari said almost sounding victorious as if this meeting were some epic battle.

"Not directly, no."

"I don't care how indirect you want it to be, we would never submit to your lord's sovereignty, even if it meant the massacre of our people." Alinari said and they all agreed.

"I would, nor would he ever ask it." Chase said politely, "As I said, the benefits would be mutual. I would humbly offer what ever you ask, as a token not of alliance, but of friendship. If you should decline then I would except your wishes and return to *my* war."

"What trust could you possibly present us? We may be isolated but we are not blind to the rise of your mighty empire." Irna said. "How long before your armies raid through here and wipe out what little we have left? Or will you bring your war to our lands leaving us caught in the middle? These are very real fears amongst our peoples."

"Understandably so." Chase keeping his cool, "Are you familiar with our history? Our early history in the final days of the Surhani?"

Irna only gave him a nod that meant *somewhat* and *get to the fucking point*.

"We were tribesman, indigenous, very much as you are." Chase spoke loudly and clearly. He prided on history. "The Surhani defiled our lands and stole our women and enslaved our men to build

their cities. A chieftain named Braccus Balmora met with the other tribes and unified them in an all out assault that meant all or nothing for their peoples. The Surhani were caught off guard and were slaughtered, not by the numbers mind you, but by the sheer will to succeed and to survive another day. It is the honor of our proud ancestors that I offer you my sincerest friendship." *...and guide you to a greater destiny*.

"A fine speech." Alinari said, mockingly applauding as he did so.

"I think I understand, but you must understand that it is still very hard for us to believe you." Sedthorn said. He was a history buff himself and there was truth to what the young prince said.

"What would you offer us?" The red haired man on the far right said. His name was Phintius of valley clan.

"I would offer you weapons, fresh foods and medicines." Chase said.

There were murmurs amongst the chieftains.

"What sort of weapons?" Phintius said.

"Only the finest crafted salarium blades." Chase frowned, "I cannot offer you armor, however, as the salarium has come in high demand due to…*my* war. To this council I offer you this, it would be the first of many, but it is still yours to keep should you decline."

Chase pulled the salarium dagger from his sleeve and laid it slowly on the table. Phintius picked it up and began toying with it, mesmerized by the fine glow of the emerald colored blade.

Again there were murmurs amongst the tribe lords and clearly it was disapproval. His offer obviously did not reach them. Finally they subsided and seemed certain of their answer. The fat one seemed to approve the most.

"We will help you on this one and only condition *prince*." Alinari said with a shit-eating grin that stretched ear to ear. "Rid us of *Kuutranarba*."

"Is that all?" Chase said, sounding surprised.

The look on Alinari's face was priceless. The other tribe lords were just as surprised by his response. Surely he was joking. No man would stand against a raging god…

"I was going to do that anyway." Chase smiled.

"W-What trick is this?" Alinari stuttered.

"No trick." Chase laughed. "What good would our friendship be if you're all dead?"

"And how do you intend to stop him?" Sedthorn said, clearly amused.

"I intend to kill him."

A roar of laughter bellowed throughout the rustic shack. Irna and Sedthorn were the only ones that were not laughing. They had their doubts, of course. After all, you can't kill a god…or can you? And if you could would it bode well for them? But considering their circumstances they were more than willing to have an extra hand about, especially one as capable as a Ji'Kodian.

A few moments passed and Irna sat forward with her hands folded in her lap.

"Could it really be done?" Her intentions were desperate but she hid it from her tone well. "*Can* he be killed?"

"It won't stop me from trying." Chase said. He was actually excited. When Hulie and Chase were young, their tutor Fulo told them tales of great heroes immortalized by their exploits when they faced and overcame impossible odds. Stories like Erdnoth of South Horn's battle against the undead, General Agarymn's victory against the dreaded Maelthorp, and of course Braccus Balmora's occupation of what is now the great city of Balmaria. These stories drove the two boys through their hardships at Ji'Kodia and made them the men they were today. Surely Hulie would've been envious of such an opportunity to be written about for a thousand years and Chase was not about to pass it up. It was all or nothing in their violently eventful lives and if Chase were to perish in this battle the so be it. Let him be remembered as the fool who fell before all mighty Hark of the Eastern Seas. Behind Chase's excitement there was still his mission and if it meant killing Hark to earn their trust then it must be so.

"What will you do?" Irna said.

Chase thought for a moment, "First, I must know all you can tell me."

"*Kuutranarba* attacks often, every two or three days or so. Our villages were his feeding grounds. Our safest option was to come together and form a defense perimeter with our unified numbers." Irna said woefully.

"And it was working too, until the damned diseases came." Sedthorn Added.

Irna nodded in agreement, "For a time, it was working and he was forced to find food elsewhere." She paused, "You must understand how little food there is out, for us and for a creature of such tremendous size. When he gets hungry enough he returns even more violent than the time before and we are being stretched very thin."

"We are afraid to eat anything these days. The cholera is everywhere and we quarantine the bodies with fire." Phintius said.

"We don't sleep often. *Kuutranarba* doesn't sleep and he feeds at any time of the day and more often at night. It's a terrible thing, the victims never see him coming." Sedthorn said.

"What sort of weapons do you have?" Chase said just short of interrupting.

"Not much, but we do have stone-headed spears and some carving tools." Phintius said, "We have plenty of bows, but we have a limited supply of arrows and we'll need them if we are to hunt in the southern mountains."

"Our supplies are limited prince." Sedthorn said. "There is little we can offer that would help you anyway. Not against the *swarms*."

"The swarms?" Chase said.

"Surely you have seen his army of vermin?" Alinari spat. "Their filthy little carcasses carpet our plains. It's those little bastards we have to worry about. They bring the cholera and the cold fever."

"They are also quite aggressive when *Kuutranarba* is around." Phintius added. "He is their over-mind, or whatever you want to call it. When they get into their frenzy they can tear a man to pieces. I have witnessed it first hand."

As sure Phintius spoke, Chase's finely tuned hearing caught what he interpreted as the faint caw-cawing of birds. It was almost cheerful like the serene noises of the ocean where the gulls sang their low requiems. Songs that were actually quite lonely and woeful to those who listened…or who were able to listen. And Chase realized right quick that this was certainly not a song. It was a battle cry.

The faint caw-cawing became slight waves of din, *"cccaaahhhiiiieee-aaahhhiiieee"* followed by a low rumbling which quickly became a thunderous roar of thousands of fluttering wings. The god awful noise was now so loud it was deafening, "*CCCAAAAHHHIIIIEEEE-CCCAAAAAAHHHHHIIIEEEE-CCCAAAAHHHHHIIIIEEEE*"

And then,

"***SSSSSQQQQQUUUUUAAAAAAWWWWWKKKKKK!!!!!!!!***"

"*Kuutranarba*!" The tribelords screamed in unison.

The poorly constructed makeshift council house rattled, creaked, and groaned. What boards that were not already cracked slip wide and the frame of the structure tilted sideways but did not give way. The shack was apparently stronger than it looked, but it was only a matter of time now. Chase, Punabi, Palidor and four of the tribe lords made it out when the shack finally caved. Wylan of the razor-grass clan had been trapped inside. He did not speak during the meeting but his horribly gurgled cries of agony that spoke far louder than words. He was gut-wound from falling debris and his time was up, but the poor man would not die quickly enough.

Kuutranarba struck tremendous force that, and this wasn't often, it actually scared the living shit out Chase. It was the surprise mostly; the monster bird had landed directly in front of him and little more than thirty feet away. *Kuutranrba* had squashed a mule like a grape under it enormous talon. With sinister grace he bent down and bit off the mules head in one swift motion. He gobbled, gobbled, and swallowed it and then looked up directly to where Chase was standing.

A courageous spearman flanked the devil bird from the left and drove his spear into the thick plumage of feathers just under it's right wing. But the pitiful stone spearhead only got caught and

tangled in the thick mass of feathers. *Kuutranarba* turned his attention to the poor fool and gave him a sideways kick that sliced him wide open. The man slumped over, gutted like a fish, his bowels stretched upon the dusty ground and then the birds came. Hundreds at once dived in and pecked their share. Chase could no longer see the body, as it was now a frantic wall of flapping wings. The ripping sound they made Chase a little sick. And then a swarm of birds began to bump and thud into him. They would have ripped Chase to pieces as well if it were not for his blessed cloak made of the sacred winter-hemp fibers that could stop all but salarium edged weapons. Instead he was bombarded with blistering pain and collapsed down to one knee. He had no idea how many birds were perched on his back clawing and digging uselessly, but their sheer weight had pushed him down.

Chase had glanced to his right and saw a barrel of tallow and dry wrapped stokes. It gave him an idea. He weaved to the left and then with all his might he gave a tumbling shoulder roll to his right crushing many birds beneath him and knocking loose the rest. He gave a mad dash to the barrel and dipped his first stoke with the amber goop. He quickly looked around and above him hanging from an awning post was a glass lantern with its slow burning flame. He gave the lantern a closed fist backhand. The glass shattered when his knuckles made contact and he briefly winced at the pain. He dipped his stoke in the lantern *fwup!* came the flame.

The birds came swarming in for a second wave but held back from the flame of the torch Chase flailed wildly about. *Good,* Chase thought, *it's working*. Chase was also relieved to see that the remaining chieftains had made it safely off the streets. Palidor had also made off seeing to his father's safety. Only Punabi and a few other brave men remained, although they were forced to back into a corner where the birds could not easily get to them. Chase waved them forward with his torch and for moment he thought they wouldn't come to him and then reluctantly they did. One by one they did their own mad dash to where Chase was fending off the winged army. Punabi was the first to reach him and he quickly lit his own torch and stood with Chase. There were thirteen of them when the last man finally stood forth.

"Fine thinking prince," Punabi yelled to him and he was still hardly audible amidst the pandemonium. "I feel like we're holding our own funeral candles and your leading the vigil. So then….what now?"

A good question.

"Where's the big bastard?" Chase asked himself aloud.

Another good question. When Chase was covered by the little vermin *Kuutranarba* had wandered off. Chaos was everywhere and even though the leather tent hid them from the eyes of the birds, some of those birds were ripping their way through them. People were screaming and dying everywhere. It was as if the gates of hell had opened right above these lands. Chase had witnessed the horror of the epidemic and now *this*? At first Chase had thought it was beginning to rain and realized quickly the milky drops were turds. The sky was spiraling in a black cloud of fluttering mass.

"*Kuutranara* headed east into…into the quarantine." Punabi gasped, "He means to feed on the sick for they are easy prey."

Chase though a moment and then wrapped a cotton cloth scarf around his face covering his mouth and nose.

"I urge you all to do the same." Chase said to them.

"Surely you don't mean to follow him in there." One of the men said.

"You're damn right I am." Chase retorted.

"You're crazy stranger." Punabi said. "But, perhaps that's what we need right now. I'll follow."

The others reluctantly agreed. *All or nothing*.

As they made their way down the eastern vein of road that connected to the quarantine Chase could hear the heavy thuds of the devil bird's talons and it was always followed by a painful cry of anguish. Chase also noticed that the hillsman kept an abundant supply of that torch oil here and then it dawned on him, the funeral pyres. They took a sharp left turn and there was *Kuttranarba* toying

with his next meal. Two young children around ten years of age, and already in shock with hypotension, were sprawled up in the only remaining corner of their grass house torn askew. They were crying and were too weak to move.

Chase had to think quick. He grabbed a clay pot from a wicker basket and filled it with the amber goop. Then, he stuffed it with a cloth and lit it with his torch. He traded the torch with one of the men's spears and with one hand still holding the flaming torch- oil bomb he cast out the spear with his other. This stone tipped spear whizzed through the air with uncanny speed and with a little bit of luck it had struck a soft spot between the big birds tail feathers.

Kuutranarba gave a deafening screech whipped around to meet his insolent transgressor. And chase met his with a mighty toss that smashed the flaming clay pot upon *Kuutranarba*'s beak. There was a hefty ***Pwoof*** sound as the flames briefly blanketed the devil bird's face in one bright starburst. The flames did not take as Chase had hoped, it burned out quickly only singeing his head feathers black. It was however enough to surprise *Kuutranarba* and the devil bird gave another deafening shriek and quickly took to the skies in retreat. Almost instantly the other birds followed after him…and after a few moments all was silent again except for one more ***"SSSQQQUUUAAAWWWKKK!!!!"*** fading into the distance, it was the angry cry of defeat.

"A fine display Balmarian." Punabi said to Chase with a pat on the back. "Your reputation precedes you. He'll be back though and he'll be pissed."

Chase only shrugged it off, "I was caught off guard. I'll be ready for him next time."

"Yeah…" Punabi shivered, "Next time."

The damage had been done and once more the village was torn asunder. Survivors began to creep out of their homes and helped the injured. People had quickly scavenged through the decimated shack but it was too late for Wylan. The four surviving chieftains only watched in horror as they pulled the mangled corpse from the wreckage. Most of them, except the fat one of course, greeted Chase with appreciation and slight admiration

"We heard you chased of *Kuutranarba*." Phintius said, amused but not smiling.

"I did only what I could think of." Chase said humbly.

"But, it worked." Punabi added. "He scared the bastard halfway back to the hills. Praise the stranger, he saved many lives today."

"We owe you a debt of gratitude," Irna said, her eyes trained on her peoples rescue efforts. "If you can help us, then my people at least, will aid you."

"You have my support as well." Phintius said.

Sedthorn nodded in agreement, but kept himself deep in thought.

All eyes were on Alinari who only stood there with his pudgy arms crossed and a scowl stitched on his lips.

"I still do not trust you Balmarian, for all we know this interloper may have summoned the beast to us." Alinari spat. A nerve twitched in Chase's head and but for a moment he had the urge to cut the fat mans throat and kick the remaining life out of him while he bled profusely on the ashy ground. Instead Chase just stood there awestruck and dumbfounded.

"Alinari…" Irna began to say.

"I don't want to hear it. If you wish to support this vagabond then be my guest. My peoples have far more important duties than baby sitting a gods-damned prince!"

Alinari stormed off. His son Palidor gave Chase a slight nod of appreciation and then followed after his father.

"Sorry prince," Sedthron said, "That one is difficult to say the least. We don't hold much love for him around here and I doubt he holds much love even from his own people."

Punabi softly grabbed Chase by his sleeve and Chase turned his attention to him.

"I am one of his people, but I refuse to do nothing. I will stand with you and I'm sure there are others who will do the same." Punabi said.

"What would you have us do?" Irna said faintly.

Chase pondered this.

The first thing Chase asked for was fishing nets and was surprised at the number they had on hand so far from the rivers. Apparently the hillsman left nothing behind when it came to survival and such tools would be hard to come by when necessary. Irna was curious what he would needed them for and he explained,

"We're going to string these nets up around the village. They may not keep *Kuutranarba* out…but, it should provide some protection against his hordes."

Irna was doubtful but it was worth a shot.

The second thing Chase asked was for all who were able, whether it be man, woman, or child, to construct massive barbs of sharply pointed timbers that jutted out in all directions. He instructed that they be sturdy enough to resist the devil bird's weight, perhaps by anchoring them against stones. He also told them to construct as many as were physically possible and scatter them in groups around the more populated areas of the village.

Chase did not sleep that first night. There would be more activity during the day and he would awaken more easily should Hark return. He was sure it was Hark, but it wasn't the regal beast he and Hulie witnessed on the open seas. They only saw him once briefly and from a distance. Hark had not decided to attack them, which was a rare thing for sailors, and it was partly because he had already fed well and he would not dare attack Hulie the grandson of Odineron Lord of the Sea. That has changed of course, due to his newly acquired madness. Chase didn't quite think he was undead, surely he was ill, but Chase had dealt with undead on more occasions then he cared for and *Kuutranarba* suffered a different curse. One that was very much like himself, *alien*.

On the third day, the preparations were nearly complete. The tired miserable people of Aljiri had effectively made a netted screen over the perimeter of their city. That night, Chase retired to his quarters. A small one room mud hut dimly lit by a bee's wax candle. In one corner, a bedding of hay and straw where Chase meditated intently. In another corner, the locals left gifts of food and wine. Of course, Chase suspected the tribelord Alinari had been sending him contaminated food stuffs. Little did Alinari know, was that Chase was actually immune to most illnesses (a trait inherited from his biological parents). When Alinari realized Chase wasn't succumbing to illness, he resorted to poison instead. The poison was extracted from a plant called chokeweed. It was a nasty toxin whose effects paralyzed the victims airpassages, eventually killing them by suffocation. It was almost tasteless to the unsuspecting. Even Chase almost swallowed the substance before that limestone aftertaste kicked in. He spit the wine all over the floor and forced himself to vomit. Still gagging from the vomit, Chase had a fire in his eyes. He was in a very difficult situation. On the one hand, with Alinari out of the way, his people would be in better, more caring hands. On the other, he had no proof to challenge the fat one. If he started conflict now the other tribelords would never give him their support, and more likely they would declare the Balmarian their enemy. But just when Chase was about to dismiss the incident his solution walked through the door. The young Palidor with Punabi hobbling in behind him.

but the cabbage had acted as filler and the boiled dandelion shoots gave it a sweet tangy flavor.

A true master of the wild or *nyet nyu ci kunari* as said in a dead language that they used in Ji'Kodia as code. He knew it only too well and he had the mark to prove it.

Author Susan Sontag wrote that cholera was more feared than some other deadly diseases because it dehumanized the victim. Diarrhea and dehydration were so severe the victim could literally shrink into a wizened caricature of his or her former self before death.[5]

Other symptoms include rapid dehydration, rapid pulse, dry skin, tiredness, abdominal cramps, nausea, and vomiting.